

Gothic and the Videogame

Recent years have seen an increasing recognition of the subgenres of the Gothic literary tradition, as this volume attests. These subgenres, whilst always being present in the Gothic, are more prominently occupying a range of media, as creators of Gothic narratives explore new ways in which to relate their tales. From the first novels, like Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*ⁱ, the Gothic has always been interested in exploring and critiquing the representations of femininity, and critics such as Emma Cleryⁱⁱ and Donna Heilandⁱⁱⁱ have utilised Gothic narratives to consider how women are treated in society, both in the past and contemporarily. This is achieved through an interrogation of such themes as the loss of human identity, fracturing of the self, and the construction of women as monstrous or 'other'; all themes found within Gothic narratives. These themes appear across multiple media platforms, in the words of Laurie Taylor to 'question, define, and redefine the [boundaries]'^{iv} of femininity, and videogames constitute a recent addition to the canon of media that utilises the Gothic to interrogate cultural doubts, concerns, and fears in this way.

Videogames, whilst not specifically a Gothic medium, are well suited to representing Gothic themes, which Taylor designates 'ludic-gothic'.^v The inclusion of narrative and rhetoric as standard videogame tropes makes them useful conduits not only for considering Gothic, but also for the Gothic sub-genres that are beginning to become part of the canon, such as Gothic posthumanism. Robert Geraci writes that videogames are 'an illustration of our human potential' because 'in games, we always come back to life, and thanks to what we learn in the process, we come back better than before'.^{vi} Despite (or even because of) this resurrective power, videogames are equally an illustration of posthuman potential, and as such allow the player to

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consider gender, posthumanism, and the continuing and changing role of patriarchy in the twenty-first century.

When defining the posthuman condition in her seminal work, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies In Cybernetics, Literature, And Informatics*, N Katherine Hayles considers that the 'posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation', that it 'considers consciousness...as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow', that 'the body is the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate' and finally, and she believes, most importantly, that 'the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines'.^{vii} The posthuman condition, as defined by Hayles, can be seen in the technology that is used to create prosthetics that can feel^{viii} or glasses that can offer augmented reality.^{ix} In videogames these real life prosthetics are frequently bestowed on players, protagonists, and other characters, as a matter of course, and therefore offer crucial ways to investigate the phenomenon in society. The learning of new skills through 'levelling up' and acquiring new powers and abilities in videogames makes them a space that enables posthuman 'experiences—the player gains transcendent powers and a potential for continued growth'^x past that of the human, and even past death. Videogames then, are particularly suitable outlets through which to consider posthumanism: as increasingly intelligent computers and software come into being, the very technology that creates this posthuman condition is an appropriate medium for critiquing its possibilities and dangers.

In considering the hopes and fears of posthumanism, the boundaries between it and postmodernism are blurred when Fred Botting offers insight into what he calls 'Postmodern

Gothic', which includes 'the confrontation with scientifically-inspired machines, mutants and inhuman, automated worlds', which brings about 'the loss of human identity and the alienation of self from both itself and the social bearings in which a sense of reality is secured'.^{xi} Michael Sean Bolton (who also writes in this volume) broadly agrees with this, considering that 'Gothic works confront mainstream fears of external threats from the alien other, faceless terrorism, and technological annihilation', going on to suggest that 'some recent works indicate a shift in concern from external to internal threats to subjectivity and human agency'.^{xii} These themes converge in posthuman Gothic, a subgenre that allows the exploration of these issues and enables us to consider our relationship with technology in the twenty first century, for as Bolton writes, 'the source of dread in the posthuman Gothic lies not in the fear of our demise, but in the uncertainty of what we will become and what will be left of us after the change'.^{xiii} It is this concept that the videogames *Portal* and *Portal 2* address through the figure of GLaDOS, a posthuman computer constructed around a human consciousness, and whose original identity becomes lost in the technological system she inhabits.

Play, Setting, and Character: Introducing Portal

Portal and its sequel *Portal 2* are not the first videogames that come to mind when investigating the Gothic. As Ewan Kirkland states, the games 'high-tech world of white, featureless test chambers, artificially intelligent super computers, laser targeting security robots and the portal gun itself, an elegant device allowing the player to pass through one flat surface to another, has none of the imagery commonly associated with Gothic culture'.^{xiv} However, beneath the technological veneer of a robotic antagonist (which itself foreshadows the posthuman condition) there is a narrative of female imprisonment, trauma, and emancipation, of which

Gothic fiction has been concerned since its inception. This is achieved through an underlying—or embedded—narrative that exists alongside the games structure as a puzzle solving game, which the player can, if she chooses, explore. In videogames, an embedded narrative differs from that in other media, and is one that is constructed within the landscape or setting itself, to create ‘affective potential or communicate significant narrative information’.^{xv} As the player enters a space in a game world, for example a deserted room, and looks around, she may experience an emotional reaction to that space, especially ‘where the space has been transformed by narrative events’.^{xvi} It is this embedded narrative that defines the *Portal* games as Gothic, articulating a tale of imprisonment, madness, loss, and acceptance centered around a posthuman antagonist, who embodies the role of the traditional Gothic female, the monstrous Feminine, and the postfeminist Gothic woman, endowing the characters with these Gothic themes attempts to interrogate the role of the woman in the *Portal* universe and, more widely, in contemporary culture.

In order to understand the *Portal* universe and how the games function as an example of posthuman Gothic, it is important to firstly explore the structure of the game, to show how it enters into the Gothic tradition, and how the setting and ludic elements of the game make up a significant part of this structure. Initially, the setting of the *Portal* games seems to bear little resemblance to that of traditional Gothic fiction; the Enrichment Centre the player travels through appears very different from the Gothic mansion in the *Castle of Otranto*, for example. Just like the traditional Gothic castle, however, the enrichment centre is filled with hidden and forgotten rooms, locked doors, and labyrinthine passages, which gives the player her first notion that this game is not simply a puzzle solving exercise, but that there is something hidden beneath its surface. The ludic aspects of the game are straightforward: there are a series of spatial

puzzles, in which the player has to guide the protagonist from point A to point B. In order to complete each level, the player creates pairs of 'portals'—holes that allow instantaneous movement between one place and another, and these aid movement through space—which the player uses to assist in solving puzzles, and to guide the female protagonist through the game. To do this, the player has to assess trajectories, speed, and use lateral thinking in the completion of what are specifically mathematical and scientific problems. Whilst solving these problems, and using the same methods, the player is able to explore the enrichment centre, discover the hidden rooms, and uncover parts of the embedded narrative that are built into the setting itself.

Whilst the setting of *Portal* provides the player with the initial clues to its Gothic narrative, it is in the construction of the small cast of characters that this becomes explicit. There are two females in the game; Chell the protagonist, and GLaDOS the antagonistic super computer, and the second game adds a third character, Wheatley. Two further characters make appearances through recordings that are triggered automatically as the player guides Chell through the enrichment centre exploring the abandoned rooms and corridors, Cave Johnson the CEO of Aperture Science, and his personal assistant Caroline. Performing the role of Chell, the player is given a first-person perspective, which allows the player to more easily identify *as* the protagonist. As well as the usual videogame tropes of not showing the character, marked by a lack of visual, aural, or oral reminders of her presence, *Portal* employs several other devices that encourage player identification as Chell. She is rarely seen, and is referred to as 'you' throughout the entire game by both GLaDOS and Wheatley, an immersive technique in videogames that leads to the illusion that it is the player being addressed, rather than the protagonist. Similarly, the gender of the character is rarely referred to, allowing both male and female players to take the role, without any significant difficulty, especially if the game is played as a puzzle-solving

exercise, rather than interacting with the narrative. Also, the name Chell is reminiscent of the word 'shell' literally a shell for the player to inhabit. This then, submerges the player in the diegesis of the game as part of it, rather than creating a secondary level of identification with the protagonist, in which the player is conscious that she is controlling a third party. The benefit of the first-person perspective is twofold; firstly, this perspective allows the ludic aspects of the game to be more accurate. When trying to complete spatial puzzles in a 3D environment, it is both easier and more precise to be able to work out the positioning of the portals, and by extension the path Chell will take through each level, if the player can see from her perspective. Secondly, the first-person perspective allows the player to enter into the narrative to a greater extent than if she were controlling an explicitly separate avatar, and being able to see that character, with its own physical presence on the screen. The positioning of the 'camera' in videogames that use the first-person perspective means that there is very little distance between that of the player and that of the protagonist, a concept discussed by narratologists as narrative distance,^{xvii} whereby the proximity of the protagonist and the player to each other denotes how closely the player may identify with, or as, the protagonist.

Whilst the player takes the role of the protagonist, she does not take the role of the chief character. Instead, this belongs to GLaDOS, the antagonist of the *Portal* games. The name of this character is an acronym, standing for *Genetic Lifeform and Digital Operating System*. GLaDOS is a hybrid of human consciousness and computer technology and it is in this character that the Gothic and the Posthuman elements of both the narrative and the game revolve. Donna Haraway, in her groundbreaking *A Cyborg Manifesto* defines a cyborg as 'a hybrid of machine and organism...simultaneously animal and machine'^{xviii} and initially GLaDOS appears to fulfil this criterion; she is a genetic lifeform—an organism, yet the narrative beginning of this character

establishes that whilst she began as a human being, the GLaDOS character retains none of the organic material that a cyborg would. Piecing together the narrative in a typically Gothic fashion, through pictures, audio clips, and memories, the player learns that the genetic lifeform portion of GLaDOS was originally Caroline, the personal assistant of the Aperture Science's CEO Cave Johnson. Like many other Gothic heroines before her, Caroline is 'an innocent and blameless heroine threatened by a powerful male figure and confined by a labyrinthine interior space'.^{xix} When the research into creating a computer to house the consciousness of Cave Johnson is complete he has died, and instead, Caroline's consciousness is forcibly removed from her body and placed inside a computer mainframe instead, as per Johnson's instructions: 'If I die before you people can pour me into a computer, I want Caroline to run this place. She'll argue. She'll say she can't. She's modest like that. But you make her. Hell, put her in my computer. I don't care'.^{xx} Incarceration into the computer system, it is revealed, instantly drives Caroline insane and leads her to attempt to kill the Aperture Science employees in revenge, as she suffers a complete mental collapse, and establishes Caroline as a posthuman Gothic figure. This causes her to be, literally, turned off, until the Aperture Science team can devise a method by which they can control her power. It is at this time that Caroline becomes the supercomputer GLaDOS, and is trapped within the Aperture Science Enrichment Centre (the setting of the game), in order to be able to supervise and control the research taking place in the centre, and to take over all the routine tasks that the scientists do not want to do, such as monitoring the testing of the experimental portal device that is used throughout the game.

As part of her programming, and as a control mechanism, the scientists at Aperture implement a digital feedback loop; when a test is successfully completed, GLaDOS is given a digital equivalent of enjoyment, and leads her to create another test, in order to achieve that

feeling again. The result of this feedback loop is an 'addiction' to testing, or more precisely, 'a built-in euphoric response to testing',^{xxi} and even after the facility is shut down, GLaDOS continues to force subjects to conduct tests, which is where the first game begins, with the reviving of Chell so she can become a test subject. Whilst the imprisonment of Caroline's consciousness within the computer system and the removal of her body, along with the addiction that she is given by the scientists, is enough to expose Caroline's role as a specifically posthuman Gothic heroine, her incarceration at the hands of the employees of Aperture Science is compounded by the implantation of several personality cores, which include dampening spheres, designed to stifle her intelligence and decision making abilities, thus making her more pliable and allow the scientists to more easily control her. Tellingly, all of these spheres, or cores, are male. The player is introduced to one of these personality cores, Wheatley, the third character in the *Portal* series—designed to be the 'dumbest moron who ever lived'—at the beginning of *Portal 2*, when he revives Chell from cryogenic hibernation. It is Wheatley who assists Chell when GLaDOS is revived (after Chell has beaten and deactivated her at the end of the first game) accidentally, and Chell is again forced to perform more tests, feeding GLaDOS' addiction, until her consciousness is removed from the computer, and replaced by Wheatley's, who also becomes insane and tries to kill both GLaDOS and Chell. Implantation into the GLaDOS system then, reads cyborgization as a descent into the Gothic horrors of madness, rather than the intended utopian realisation of posthumanism.

The Three Gothic Females

For GLaDOS, the environment she is trapped in is a constructed world 'in which the damsel in distress cannot escape her painful fate. Masculinity defines and contains her [...] a

process almost invariably violent',^{xxiii} both figuratively, and literally. A drawing in the game world shows Caroline being forced into the computer system by several men in white coats, and this is compounded by having her personality supplanted by male qualities. This, then shows a world in which the female body, or the removal of it, is the 'battleground of female oppression [...] act[ing] out one of the most ancient and perhaps most fundamental of misogynistic fantasies: that women are nothing but body'^{xxiii}. The removal of Caroline from her own body, and subsequent implantation into a machine, represents the central Gothic core of the game, refuting both her gender and her humanity, and this creates a Gothic nightmare, rather than a posthuman utopia such as that posited by Norbert Wiener. Caroline is the victim of patriarchal power then, literally reduced to being 'a set of mechanical functions'^{xxiv} by being placed inside a computer system, over which her control is limited by the dampening spheres that are then attached to it

Caroline's inclusion in the digital operating system as the genetic lifeform, or human, part of the program means that she is included in a periodic backing up of the system. This then, means that GLaDOS can be reanimated at any time through the restoration of the program she is encased in, ensuring that her immortality is maintained as long as there is sufficient power to run her hardware. Usually, a computer system is restored after a malfunction in the programming, or the inability to perform correctly, reverting back to a fully functional version of the program; however, GLaDOS relates that the operating system that she is included in was corrupted during the genesis of the project, at the point Caroline was inserted into it, therefore making the subsequent backup corrupt. In creating a backup of the corrupted and insane GLaDOS program, the human within the program is also backed up, and as such is denied death, becoming a veritable ghost in the machine; her personality and memories are stored in the hardware, and the

software, to allow her to live forever, even when that self is suppressed and denied. This calls to mind the notion of the horror trope of the body without a soul, as described by Barbara Creed in *The Monstrous-Feminine*. However, whilst Creed writes that 'several of the most popular horrific figures are "bodies without souls"',^{xxv} for GLaDOS, this concept is subverted and made more horrific, becoming the posthuman 'soul without a body'. Even if there is a malfunction (such as occurs at the end of *Portal*, when she is defeated by Chell and appears to die), GLaDOS (and therefore Caroline) does not die, but rather is placed in a form of suspended animation, as there is the possibility of the program being restarted by a third party as happens in the second game, when GLaDOS is accidentally reawakened by Wheatley. Here, then, GLaDOS' very existence is controlled by the scientists who oppress her, controlling even her ability to die. Whilst a major theme of the game is an exploration of the use of Posthuman technology—considering the ramifications of a corrupt artificial intelligence on the humans around it—there is also a darker theme in this game, the consequences of being subjected to trauma. Like her Gothic predecessors, GLaDOS is 'physically and psychologically constrained by societal limitations, scarred by madness, and locked into monstrosity',^{xxvi} and it is this that changes her from being a traditional Gothic heroine to the monstrous feminine character that she is for a large part of the games and the narrative.

Donna Heiland notes, in *Gothic and Gender* that to 'inhabit a woman's body is to be a Gothic heroine',^{xxvii} which can be seen in the first incarnation of Caroline as she becomes GLaDOS. However, this changes when GLaDOS takes charge of the Aperture Science Enrichment Centre, and this forms the basis of the second part of GLaDOS' Gothic incarnation. Being taken from her body and imprisoned in the computer changes her from a Gothic heroine, a victim of patriarchal oppression, to the monstrous female, explicitly marked by the change from

being Caroline to being GLaDOS. At the point she becomes posthuman, femininity in the game takes on a darker, distinctly monstrous aspect after GLaDOS floods the Enrichment Centre with a deadly neurotoxin during 'Bring Your Cat to Work Day' in revenge for her imprisonment, refuting both her status as a Gothic heroine, her femininity, and the nurturing role her gender usually intimates. As the monstrous female, GLaDOS inverts the notion of woman as the source of all life; she is instead a source of death, repeatedly subjecting individuals to 'testing'—progressively harder puzzles, that invariably kill them. At this point, even though GLaDOS has been in existence for some time, the modest, innocent character of Caroline, along with the predetermined and monolithic understanding of femininity as nurturing, maternal, and protective (this is something Stéphanie Genz explores in *Postfemininities in Popular Culture*^{xxviii}) is exchanged for the contradictory understanding of the female as antagonist, with GLaDOS' insanity and need for revenge transforming the positive feminine virtues for their transgressive opposites.

Once her transformation into the Gothic monster is complete, GLaDOS cannot remember her original incarnation as Caroline; her 'human identity has been stolen, wiped out and replaced with a grim purpose that denies [her] previous identity'^{xxix} as a woman. She has also been implanted with specifically male characteristics, in the form of the dampening spheres, further refuting her status as female, as feminine, and as femme. It is this version of the character that exists throughout the first *Portal* game, and the first part of the second game. As the antagonist and the Gothic monster, GLaDOS takes on a distinctly anti-feminist role, through the scrutiny of the female, especially in relation to the female body and attributes of the protagonist Chell.

Throughout *Portal* and *Portal 2*, GLaDOS anti-feminist comments are designed to undermine Chell's self-worth, and further support the notion of the character as a monstrous female. These include comments such as 'this plate must not be calibrated to someone of your...generous...ness. I'll add a few zeroes to the maximum weight', and 'Here come the test results. You are a horrible person. I'm serious, that's what it says: a horrible person' and even 'the birth parents you are trying to reach do not love you'.^{xxx} These are a representative sample of the multitude of barbed comments that are designed to scrutinise and belittle Chell as a human being, and especially as a woman, by the monstrous female whose very thoughts are controlled by the male dampening spheres that are designed to refute her femininity. This changes at the point GLaDOS becomes PotatOS, the third incarnation of Gothic femininity in the game. The personality spheres and dampening cores, the masculine components of the computer program are removed from her, and it is GLaDOS herself that articulates the futility of such insults, defending Chell when Wheatley makes similar comments. Here again, we see the influence of patriarchy, both in the game universe, and more widely throughout contemporary culture, as the game forces the player to take on the role of Chell, and to be subjected to these insults, by both GLaDOS and Wheatley.

The unique character construction of GLaDOS as a formally female, cyborgized, entity, who becomes monstrous through patriarchal control (in the form of the male dampening spheres attached to her personality) and who is abusive of Chell, a female protagonist, offers insight into the continuing role of patriarchy in twenty-first century society, conveying the Gothic ability to interrogate this prejudice further into the posthuman Gothic realm. Rosalind Gill considers that women are as much to blame as men for 'the monitoring and surveying' of the female body and it is through this that we judge 'the performance of successful femininity'.^{xxxii} This self-

surveillance is found throughout media, especially in television and magazines, in which 'bodily shape, size, muscle tone, [...] home, finances etc. are rendered into problems that necessitate ongoing and constant monitoring and labour'. 'Women', Gill writes, 'simply cannot win',^{xxxii} suggesting a gendered competition that involves the use of women to vilify the female body and to reinforce the patriarchal notion of what a successful woman is, although GLaDOS refutes this role in her third incarnation, and instead embraces her own femininity, and recognizes Chell as an ally.

The third incarnation of Gothic femininity occurs when GLaDOS is once again removed from her body, this time the computer system that she was originally imprisoned in. Usually, release from imprisonment would signal the emancipation of the Gothic female and a return to normality. In *Portal 2*, this is complicated by the fact that GLaDOS is returned to the Gothic female state, through re-imprisonment—inside a potato battery. Whilst this appears far-fetched, the premise of the imprisonment is factually correct. A potato can be used to create enough energy to power a clock for example, and since the game's release, a working GLaDOS model has been created, that uses a potato as the battery. However, the energy produced by the potato renders GLaDOS incapable of more than thought and speech. This incarceration as PotatOS, then, signals a loss of power for the monstrous GLaDOS; she is rendered completely passive and helpless in this incarnation, and it is through this helplessness, her reliance on Chell, and the loss of the (male) dampening spheres that GLaDOS is able to rediscover the memories of her original incarnation as Caroline, which in turn re-endows her with femininity and humanity. Here, the player sees the game not only as a critique of female oppression by a patriarchal society through her incarceration by male scientists, and the masculine superimposition on her personality, but offers a redemption of the female character as she refutes the masculine traits imposed on her,

and 'resignifies her feminine position [and] regains control over her life'.^{xxxiii} GLaDOS, as PotatOS, is stripped of her omniscience and power, and whilst in this state rediscovers her original personality, and it is this that allows her to both come to terms with her treatment at the hands of the oppressive males of Aperture Science, and also with her own behaviour as GLaDOS, the Gothic Monster. This is most clearly symbolised in the epilogue of the second game, in which GLaDOS, who has been returned to her monstrous body, releases Chell, telling her 'thank God you are all right' and that 'all along, you were my best friend', her femininity, and her ability for empathy restored.

During this third part of the game, the relationship with GLaDOS becomes what Fred Botting calls 'a "posthumane" identification with the other', meaning that 'from female abjection and otherness, from corporeal destruction and rebirth, a new subject appears to be resurrected, with an ethical, compassionate spirit'.^{xxxiv} Whilst GLaDOS continues to consciously refute this as part of her character, her actions in rescuing Chell from death, and releasing her from the enrichment centre show her as having compassion for another woman, granting her the freedom that GLaDOS still cannot have, despite her mental emancipation.

Still Alive: Freedom from the Oppressors

In the *Portal* games, the representation of the female figure is explored through the paradoxical posthuman role of a single character taking the role of the Gothic heroine, the Gothic monster, and the liberated postfeminist Gothic woman. Claire Knowles writes that

the potential for feminine empowerment has always existed within the heroines of Gothic fiction, [...] but, whereas earlier heroines [...] are constrained in

their actions by the limitations placed upon them by the patriarchal society in which they live, twenty-first-century women are constrained only by their perception of their own limitations'.^{xxxv}

This is the stance the games takes; GLaDOS is able, through her return to the role of Gothic heroine, the loss of patriarchal control in the form of the dampening spheres, and her collaboration with a strong female, to come to an understanding of her own feminine power and this frees her from the subjection that she has been held in thrall to, and allows her to come to terms with the loss of her body, and her subsequent immortality.

The Gothic has always been a forerunner in considering the negative presence of patriarchy as a dominant cultural factor in contemporary society and exploring female empowerment through the rejection of this patriarchy. This videogame joins such discussions, using a technology that is itself part of a discourse around posthumanism. Videogames require a player to control a fictional character that has been created, and wholly exists, in a machine through direct, physical interactivity, a practical realization of posthumanism. This allows the player—and the critic—to consider what it means to play a game, and to assume an identity that is a truly posthuman construct. In doing so, games such as *Portal* emphasize and revise the practices of life and death – death is no longer the end of a life in these circumstances; Chell can be resurrected hundreds of times with no ill effects, or Caroline (as GLaDOS) is kept alive through insertion into the very same system being used to engage with the posthuman condition, both complicating and critiquing its use – essentially allowing the player to question what it means to be human, and asking whether she endows the character she is controlling with humanity, through control of the actions and reactions the character makes.

As well as offering such an explicit consideration of posthumanism, this game can be coded as a Gothic exploration of the female in many guises, both within a fictional capacity, and within the wider cultural remit of feminist studies, and posthuman studies. Using the antagonist as the principal character in the narrative, the player is forced to consider the (post)human trapped inside the computer as the Gothic heroine, as well as the Gothic monster, and the empowered female who has shaken off her male oppressors and established herself as a symbolically free entity, despite forever remaining trapped as a genetic lifeform and digital operating system.

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